

Blues have the skill but over-confidence could spell danger

WHEN THE DRAW for the first round proper of the F.A. Cup was announced recently, the local reaction to Wycombe Wanderers' home tie against Cheltenham Town was one of confidence.

And why not? Wycombe had just beaten Margate from the Southern League Premier Division — Cheltenham play in a division lower. Wanderers have a superior league record and are currently enjoying an unbeaten run of 18 matches without defeat. Added to that, the Blues have not lost a home league match for two years.

Despite those impressive facts, Wycombe Wanderers are no more certain of going into the round two draw on Monday than anyone else.

The F.A. Cup has a studded history of giant-killing, with Wycombe themselves slaying a few in their time. No result is predictable in this competition.

Wycombe have the skill, balance and flair to finish winners and yet their biggest mistake could be to under-estimate the opposition. If they do, then it could be the end of their interest in the Cup, for Cheltenham are the sort of side to give 100 per cent and more in this type of game and could well surprise the home side with their skills.

The big question this week, however, has been the fitness of full back Gary Hand. Since joining the Blues from Ilford a few weeks into the season, Gary has rarely put a foot wrong. Sound both in defence and going forward his presence will undoubtedly be missed if his injured ankle is still troubling him by tomorrow.

Hand doubt

The injury occurred last Saturday against Ilford. He was caught by a foul from Paul Scott and despite playing on for the rest of the first half, he had to be replaced a few minutes after the interval. The injured left ankle was badly bruised and it remains to be seen whether the "hot and cold" treatment he has been receiving at Watford F.C. this week will have done the trick. At the start of the week, Wycombe manager Brian Lee rated Hand's chances of playing as "very slim."

If he is unfit, Wanderers have a choice of alternatives. Paul Birdseye could switch from right to left back, with Paul Griffiths wearing the number two shirt, or Dave Alexander could come into midfield with Terry Reardon playing at left back. There is one more possibility. Dave Bullock, who looked in good shape against Loughborough on Monday,

could either take over as full back or come into the middle of the back four with Keith Mead switching to full back. Wanderers are fortunate to have such a wealth of defenders.

Heartened

Apart from Hand's injury problem, Wycombe should be free from other worries. And they must have been heartened by the performance of the forwards last week against Ilford. All three looked in sharper form than usual, with Steve Perrin catching the eye particularly.

He, along with Tony Horseman and Keith Searle, must have been desperately disappointed to see their work go to waste as Ilford hit back to 3-3 with the Blues' defence handing them two of their goals through errors. They are unlikely to make the same mistakes again.

Unlike Wycombe, Cheltenham were out of action last Saturday and, in fact, will not have played a game for ten days by the time the teams meet.

And Cheltenham?

The footballing public of Cheltenham still goes gog-eyed when they talk about the day Blackpool graced their town in the third round of the F.A. Cup after Cheltenham had won 2-1 at Carlisle.

But that was 41 years ago and the Carlisle achievement remains the Southern League club's only win over a Football League club. Only once since the war have they gone beyond the first round proper, and that was in 1947-48, when they went to Hull in the second.

So Cheltenham, or the Robins as they are known, have no great Cup tradition, although they have been in the first round ten times in the last 30 years.

Their record attendance was set up in 1956-57, when 8,326 people turned up to see them beaten 1-2 by Reading, and during that time they have taken Watford (1959-60) to a replay, drawing 0-0 at Cheltenham and losing 3-0 at Vicarage Road.

Times have changed since then, of course, and Cheltenham slipped out of the Premier Division five years ago. In their efforts to get back, they

have finished third — one place below promotion — in each of the last three years.

Regulars feel that their current team plays more football than any in the past decade, and they have been beaten only twice, once at home, in their competition this season.

Lailey in

They come to Wycombe on Saturday feeling that they have a genuine, if outside chance, of holding the Isthmian League champions, and feel they should benefit from having tasted the slope at Loakes Park during their friendly at the end of last season.

There are several connections between the clubs. Julian Lailey (ex-Wanderers) is with Cheltenham, and Dylan Evans (ex-Cheltenham) is with Wycombe. Tony Price is also a Cheltenham lad, and Cheltenham's Dave Lewis played one friendly for Wycombe against a German touring side five years ago.

Although Cheltenham have not scored more than four goals in any one match this season, they have consistently outplayed sides. Of their 40 goals in all competitions — only 18 of them in 11 league matches — Dave Lewis has scored exactly half.

It will mean nothing to Wycombe, but the F.A. Cup is one place Cheltenham have been scoring goals. To reach this stage, they beat Welsh League Llanelli 3-2 after being 1-2 down; Gloucester City 4-1; Cinderford Town 3-2 after being 1-2 down, and Salisbury 4-1.

Lewis has scored in all of them, with a total of seven, and he will be flanked by Pat Casey and Ken Skeen. Tony Wagstaff and David Dangerfield are the best midfield pair in their division, and if Cheltenham have reliability problems, it is at the back.

The usual back four is Roger Thorndale, Paul Crowley, Alan Jefferies and Julian Lailey, but Trevor Jones, who switches from the back to midfield or the front, has to be fitted in somewhere.

Watched

Club captain, Jefferies was left out for their last game, and amateur John Murphy was pushed in, as was amateur goalkeeper, student Conrad Johnston.

So while the front and midfield picks itself, it remains

to be seen which players manager Dennis Allen will opt for in the defence. Thorndale and Lailey are certainties.

Cheltenham's preparation has been thorough enough. Allen has had Wycombe watched by two schoolteacher friends from Reading, and he went himself on Saturday, with some of his players, to see the Ilford match.

Normally, Cheltenham's players train Tuesdays and Thursdays, but with no match for the ten days before the Wycombe clash, he had added Monday as well this week.

All the 300 stand tickets allocated were sold within three days of being made available, and with many going down on their own, Cheltenham expect at least 500 of their own supporters to be there.

Gates, as they have been in most other places, have nose-dived at Cheltenham during the past decade. It was not uncommon to see between 2,500 and 3,000 at Whaddon Road in the 1950s and 1960s, but they started with 763 this term.

They have been drawing around the 1,300 mark lately, and the drifters will stay if they can get a result at Loakes Park.

Apart from the prospect of a Football League club in the next round, Wanderers tomorrow will be bidding for a place in the club's record books. Only on three occasions have they reached the second round and they have never gone further.

In 1959 they went out to Watford in round two and in 1962 they also lost to Gravesend and Northfleet. Last season, of course, the Blues pulled off a marvellous 3-1 victory over Newport in round one but then went out to Peterborough at home 1-3.

It is a measure of their consistency that they have fought through to round one again this year — only 12 months after last season's feats.